Following eight years of failing to break big as a light novel author, Takuma finally snaps after accidentally deleting one of his manuscripts and throws himself in front of a truck--only to wake up in another world with a strange sense of deja vu as a beautiful goddess tells him of his destiny to save the universe. Can Takuma overcome the existential dread of being forced to live inside the very kind of story he's become jaded and bitter towards having to write? Find out in, ***Trapped In My Own Shitty Light Novel After Killing Myself, So I Might As Well Court the Hot-Ass Goddess Who Summoned Me!***

Chapter One: Suicide of a Light Novel Author

Well past midnight... who knows by how much? Long ago I taped over the date and time on my monitor so I wouldn't think about it.

When you're juggling three series across ten books a year, it's better not to know how much life you're giving up.

Between "My Wife Kept Bothering Me About Doing The Dishes, So I Signed Up For The Alternate-World Monster Extermination Squad, Only To Find Out She Had Already Joined," "My Little Sister Can't Possibly Be So Pants-Shitting Retarded That She Left the Oven On And Burned Our House Down With Our Parents Inside, Leaving Us Homeless and Orphaned, But Also Overcome With Teen Lust," and my 18+ series, "Who Would've Thought My Countless Hours Reading H-Doujins Would Make Me the Sex King of an Alternate World Brothel?," my creative energies have gotten spread pretty thin.

Staring absently at an open quotation mark on page 182 of ImoRetard book twelve, the synapse in my brain ordinarily responsible for reflexively typing, "that's a no-no, bro-bro!" every three chapters seems to be blocked. The longer I stare into the flux-dimmed monitor, the text grows hazier, until all the black lines begin to swirl and disintegrate into the white space behind them, like an oreo milkshake in a blender.

Everything goes black.

When I wake up, a single strand of sunlight is peeking through a warped part of the tape which connects my curtains to the wall. As I groggily stir and rub my face, I can feel the indentation of the keyboard on my forehead. My skull feels heavy and my brain numb, so it takes me a minute to process the extremely blank white screen in front of me.

My book is gone.

It doesn't take long to piece together that my forehead had landed on the backspace key and spent probably minutes on end erasing my latest volume from existence.

No need to panic, I think, *just gotta ctrl+z it back*.

I execute the life-saving keyboard shortcut; one letter returns to the page.

Incredulous, I press it again... then again... after twelve desperate clacks the words "Hazuki's ass" have returned to the page. Frantically, I mash the keys again and again, hoping that maybe it'll take just a couple hours to restore the entire book this way--but after thirty or so presses, the "undo" button on the text editor goes gray, and the keyboard shortcut no longer has any effect.

It's gone...

The thought echoes through my head as rational acceptance washes over me in a numbing blanket.

For a fleeting moment, the thought that an even higher level of crunch might be possible to meet the publishing deadline flickers in the darkness overcoming my mindspace.

The idea that my publisher may forgive and understand this incident is heard at a distance so far from the epicenter of my thoughts that it receives no follow-up.

Instead, in the center of my brain a cloud is growing and pushing everything else away--a tropical storm of thought continually picking up steam until it becomes a category-five hurricane of the single mantra:

Welp, it's time to kill myself.

The reasons are too numerous and obvious to bother considering. Only the desire to discontinue both my work and my life is powering my motor functions.

In a sudden jolt, a burst of desperate energy pulses through my body and I leap to my feet, grabbing the taped-up curtain on the window and tearing it clean from the wall. With a loud rip, the daylight comes flooding in, scorching my tired eyes.

It takes a moment before I can adjust enough to observe the outdoors; and what life-affirming view awaits beyond my second-floor Tokyo apartment window?

Just a blown-out vision of a crowded street. The kinds of people I've always hated--the cars I've never had the courage to learn to drive--the bleak emptiness of grey buildings and other symbols of a corporate hellscape which has ground my soul to dust over these last eight years.

In that moment, the disgust washing over me goes straight from my brain to my legs, and I spring into action. I'm out the door in such a blur that I hardly remember unlocking it, or whether I happen to be wearing pants. The shocked reaction of pedestrians as I burst onto the sidewalk suggests that I'm not. I smirk; *doesn't matter. If I'm gonna die in disgrace, I might as well give them a spectacle.*

My hesitation lasts only long enough to scan the road--and as luck would have it, I won't have time to reconsider. Barrelling toward the blue light at the intersection is a truck so vividly identical to the ones I've described at the start of my own novels that there’s no question in my mind about its ability to kill me.

As I cross onto the asphalt, ignoring the second wave of horrified screams from the women behind me, a smile cracks across my face.

There is no alternate world on the other side of this impact--just the sweet release of a black void where my eyes will finally rest!

What follows is a blur of blaring horns; spinning asphalt, buildings, and sky as I twirl through the air; the crunch of a truck veering into another car; alarms screeching and glass shattering; a brief glimpse of blood leaving my skull as the darkness finally swallows my sight.

Chapter Two: Awake In the Void

Everything is black.

In a state between waking and sleep paralysis, consciousness returns to me.

Is this what death is like? I thought I was going to be free from my thoughts, but it looks like I'm going to be trapped with them forever, eh? At least it's dark... and quiet.

As minutes drag on, I start to wonder when was the last time I'd stopped working long enough to actually watch an anime, play a video game, read a manga or a light novel. *I'm sure I used to love those things... if only they were here now that I have infinite time.*

Just as the thought that death might not be all I hoped for starts to crawl over me, I notice a pinpoint of light in the distance, and the first confirmation that my eyes, indeed, are actually open. I'm wondering if it's real as it steadily grows larger and closer.

Holy fuck, this is it--religion was real all along! I'm sorry Christian God, please don't send me to hell! I didn't mean to defame you by representing you as an ancient loli who loves cock in my last magazine!

Wait--surely this is just a hallucination... I'm bleeding out in the streets of Tokyo. For all I know, every second could feel like hours in my concussed and distorted mind. All of this will subside into darkness soon…

My rambling thoughts are interrupted by a woman's soothing voice, seeming to originate from the center of my own mind.

"This is no hallucination, Takuma. We have returned your consciousness from the brink."

Before I can wonder how this voice is in my head, the light grows much closer and larger, and I can make out the shadow of a figure backlit by its brilliance. It's clearly a feminine shape--a slender, long-haired and long-legged woman with breasts just large enough to be apparent in her silhouette.

"We know that you desire death--however, the Gods have determined that your soul is uniquely fit to fulfill a greater purpose."

As the woman finally touches down beside me, I get a real look at her. Lightly wavy blue hair falls to about her waist--her dress is at once flowing and heavenly, yet raunchily revealing, with about three centimeters of thigh flesh visible between long white stockings held by garters to whatever heavenly place exists beneath that barely-concealing skirt. Her midriff is entirely visible, and the only thing concealing her comfortably-sized breasts is practically a cloth bra, looping around her neck instead of shoulders. Only her ornate cape and hair tassels keep her from resembling a garden-variety prostitute--except that she's also the most beautiful woman I've ever seen in my life. She kneels beside me and extends a hand toward my face.

"Come. Let us show you to your destiny."

Now that I can see her up close, I realize that her mouth isn't moving--it must be that she can psychically speak straight into my mind. As I become transfixed on her dangling breasts, I wonder if I actually have any hands to grasp with, or even a physical form to speak of. In this world of nothingness, I'd never even thought to move.

Still, perhaps instinctively, my body seems to perform the action it knows, and I see my own hand stretching out to meet hers. As our hands clasp, the warmth and softness of her palm feels like it could take my soul to heaven right then and there.

But heaven isn't where she takes me.

Chapter Three: Ah Fuck I've Been Isekai'd

What next I behold is an endless, nondescript meadow, flanked on the sides by forest and with mountains in the distance, but meeting the horizon in the direction I'm facing.

I'm certain I've never been here, and yet this place is immediately familiar--almost exactly like something I must've described in one of my novels before.

After a second taking it in, I realize that the woman is standing just behind me--or maybe she only just appeared there. Either way, I realize from glancing back at her that she's a bit shorter than me, and I can see down her tits at such a perfect angle that it's hard to peel my eyes away.

"Does this place seem familiar to you, Takuma?"

I'm surprised at the sound of her voice coming from her own now-moving lips, sounding less like the booming sonic mind-barrage of before.

"How did you know?" I ask.

She smiles, and my heart flutters a little--come to think of it, I'm not sure I've been in such close proximity to a woman since college.

"Perhaps it would be easiest to understand if I introduced myself. My name is Aether; in terms which you could most easily comprehend, I might be considered a Goddess."

Somehow, this revelation doesn't surprise me. In fact, a strange sense of deja vu has been slowly coming over me ever since she first appeared. I say nothing and let her continue.

"To describe the exact nature and extent of my abilities as compared to yours would be unnecessarily confusing and time consuming. Instead, I will cut to the chase and tell you what is going on with you. But first--" her energy shifts--she seems to dig her heel into the dirt ever so slightly, as if readying herself for action. "-we have company."

My brow furrows as I follow the trajectory of her piercing gaze which shoots over my right shoulder. Reacting instinctively, I whip around to face the source of her concern, and am met with a sight so shocking it nearly tears my reality in twain instantaneously. All at once, I feel a brand of madness overtaking me--a confusion, revulsion, anxiety, and palpable existential dread crawling over my skin as my eyes bulge in recognition.

It's a fucking Dragon Quest slime.

It is in this moment that reality comes crashing into sharp relief--that all confusion is abated and replaced with an understanding so severe as to be infuriating: like staring at an equation all day, racking your brain on what the proof could be, only to finally realize that what you thought was a 6 was actually a badly-drawn 5, and now it's so simple a child could solve it.

This is my intellectual superposition: I know exactly what is happening, yet I cannot rationally accept it. It could be said that I am living my childhood dream, and yet my adult mind has been so weathered with cynicism that in spite of everything, I find the power to groan at the immediate sight of this thing. I am where no one has been, and yet where everyone has considered the existence of.

I have become the protagonist of an isekai light novel.

As the slime jiggles and girates harmlessly in front of me, my brow is lowered in darkness. I am pummelled with the realization of my destiny--of the stark lack of choice given to a man who has already failed his first attempt to die.

I bet I can't even be killed... I bet I'm so overpowered that the end of this journey is already a foregone conclusion.

A mad smile crests my face as the absurdity of understanding unfolds.

No... stories like this don't have conclusions. This is the kind of plot that can circle the drain for a decade before unceremonious cancellation. Have I even once seen one of these things reach the end?

As my spiraling mind starts trying to recount every single isekai I've read and determine if any of them actually concluded, the slime lurches towards me. Its amorphous body squashes and stretches up and down, building a kind of momentum and multiplying its height with each bounce, until it starts to leave the ground. Once the apex of its bounce reaches waist level, it starts in my direction, with a trajectory clearly meant to land directly on my face.

This stupid fucking thing is actually going to try and attack me, eh? I'm sure I could kill it with a flick of the finger, but I'm actually a little curious what it feels like inside one of those things.

Not even caring enough to kill the little fucker, I let it bounce straight onto my head.

Unsurprisingly, the feeling is similar to plunging into a vat of gelatin.

With overwhelming curiosity, I stick out my tongue.

Well what the hell do you know... tastes like strawberries. I guess life still has its little surprises.

After a few seconds, I start to feel a tingling on my skin similar to a menthol gel, and realize that this thing is probably trying to digest me. I'm sure that this is going to start hurting in a minute, so I quickly try to grab the thing and pull it off--only for my hands to simply slip inside of it.

Huh. I guess this is how these things actually trap their prey.

Unsure of where to go from here and feeling a little ridiculous standing in this pose with my head and hands inside of a slime, I turn to Aether. For just a moment, I catch an expression somewhere between bewilderment and annoyance which is quickly erased into something calm and collected. I can tell I've done something stupid and wrong, but throwing her off-script actually makes me feel a little bit special and clever... besides the fact that I'm losing to a slime.

"I suppose it is urgent now that I teach you of your magical abilities." Aether's voice is much more curt than before, and the thought that I'm causing it lends me a strange and perverse joy. "We can discuss the mechanics of it when the situation is less pressing, but for now, just consider the temperature at which this slime would boil, and then attempt to emanate that level of heat."

Huh. Boiling.

It's such an oddly specific idea that I start to wonder whether my powers are very particular, or so broadly encompassing that this is just the first thing she thought of. Either way, my skin is starting to sting, so I set about focusing my energy into my head and visualizing myself getting hotter and redder like I've activated Kaio-ken 4.

Sure enough, just as the pain of having my skin dissolved starts to become sincerely uncomfortable, I can hear the bubbling outside my ears and feel the light popping all over my head and hands as the slime begins to evaporate from the inside.

It holds out just a moment longer before letting out a strange and warped high-pitched cry and finally shifting its momentum forward so it can slide from my body and glop back onto

the ground. With a continued cry, assumably from the pain of having to reshape its slightly-shrunken body, it rolls off into the brush.

"As expected, you were able to understand your powers quickly," Aether remarks, as though reassuring herself that I am not, in fact, an incompetent fuckup who nearly died to a starting monster out of ignorance, but more likely just groggy from taking this all in.

It is nonetheless obvious to me that she knows, in her heart of hearts, that I am in fact a maniac in need of careful corralling to avoid oblivion. After all, I did kill myself to get here.

"You could say I have some experience with stuff like this, I guess," I respond, realizing that this is no more true for me than it is for the characters I've written to say things like this in the exact same circumstances.

"Indeed," Aether responds. She waves a hand in the air, and with a sparkling burst of light, like a cheap digital effect in a TV anime, a scroll appears and lands in her grasp.

"Pen name Takoyaki Takuma. In addition to your two ongoing series, the abbreviated Wife Isekai, and the e... ecchi novel series abbreviated Sex King," an adorable flush of pink crosses her cheeks as she's forced to confront the lewd titles of my trashy stories, "you have previously created the cancelled series Reincarneted In Another World As A Moderately-Sized Convection Oven, and constructed the setting of the currently-running manga, Eighteen Races of Beast Girl Are Lusting For My Human Body. Suffice it to say, you might be considered an expert in situations similar to the one you've now been entered into."

I bitterly smirk at the thought of my stupid cancelled series. "Wouldn't it have made more sense to pick someone who actually finished one of these stories?"

"We could find no record of an isekai light novel series having reached conclusion. And before you ask if we could've chosen someone more famous or successful... none of those people have killed themselves."

Ouch. That bitchy comment wiped the smirk right off my face as the despondent reality of my life came flooding back into my mind. Suddenly I remembered how much I still didn't want to live, and grit my teeth at the thought that I've been forced back to life.

"Alright you damn goddess, what did you bring me here for anyways? To save the stupid world or whatever? Let's get it over with so I can go back to sleep forever."

"This isn't the sort of journey one can simply 'get over with.' In order to prevent a mass extinction event in this universe, we will have to start from your current position of city-scale power grade and work our way up to a dimensional-scale power grade in order to combat the galaxy-chewing Yog-Sothoth. Our only hope is in our relative imperceptibility at our current status, though stealth will become a difficult concern once your power has surpassed the level of this solar system's sun."

"Great. Of course we've got a long-runner on our hands. How many volumes do you think it'll take to reach galactic scale? Fifty? Sixty? Gonna be hard to keep it interesting if you don't want us to get canceled..." I realize that my sarcasm is being aired out loud and that I sound like a raving autist around this point, but I can hardly bring myself to care.

"Takuma..." Aether's voice is at once stern and worried, but she pauses immediately to exhale and allow her features to soften. For once, she seems compassionate, and I feel just a touch of embarrassment.

"...I understand this is overwhelming, and that you've been forced into this situation beyond your wishes. What we ask of you is unfair, and seemingly insurmountable. Ultimately, we will be asking you to achieve things which even we do not fully conceive the possibilities of. You are destined to a power far greater than mine--beyond the mortal consideration for godhood. The responsibility of taking on this journey is outside the realm of what any normal person would be asked to shoulder, much less someone already exhausted with the turbulent reality of an average life in their own world."

This line strikes a chord with me. Suddenly, out of nowhere, this goddess has given words to a part of my nature which I've yet to so poignantly define.

She's right--I was exhausted. I felt like I couldn't fight anymore--like there was nothing left for me to throw myself at. I'd already accomplished my teenage dream of becoming an author so long ago that I couldn't remember why it was something I'd wanted to do in the first place.

Grinding my imagination against the stone of marketability and crunching myself through the countless work hours it took just to eek out a living writing books that weren't even selling enough to receive anime adaptations had been killing me for years. I'd long given up on the idea that there was something else for me in that world--that I could shift gears and realign myself on a path towards happiness. I just wanted to get that shitty life over with.

Aether continued.

"It is the will of the Pantheon that I, the most powerful goddess who could be temporarily spared from the task of managing my part of universal law, use every power at my disposal to assist you in your journey. I am not all-knowing, all-understanding or inherently just in all of my actions; but I am, at the very least, a proper and intelligent goddess. I can offer you both physical power and emotional support... whatever it is you need to pursue our ends."

Something about her words had made me uncomfortable. Even though she was being sincerely kind, she squirmed a little as she spoke of emotional support. Thinking back, I remember how she spoke directly into my mind before, and seemed to understand me even without speaking. I also remember how I studied her thighs, her face, her breasts--and how I wallowed in the thought that I'd yet to know how it felt to make contact with those things.

Now I feel pathetic.

I collapse to the ground, cross my legs, close my eyes, and think.

Aether doesn't say anything, but I can imagine her looking upon me with sullenness, wondering if there's anything she can do, and regretting her previous comment about my incomplete book series. It is already far from my mind.

The fact of the matter is, there's nowhere to run. The gods aren't going to let me die, and this woman is going to do whatever she can to convince me to fight, even if it means sacrificing her dignity. It's not like I'm completely pathetic and worthless--I've been living on my own as a fully-fledged adult for half a decade already. I'm well aware of responsibility and living in a world with lofty expectations of me. As far as being forced into a situation goes, I could stomach a lot worse. At least I got to experience the inside of a slime…

I finally open my eyes. Aether's jolt up to meet my gaze, but I'm not looking at her--I'm staring off into the distance at the mountains and taking a deep breath of the soothing aromatic grass--appreciating the stark silence of a land without noise pollution--the clear, open sky of a

smogless meadow. *I'll bet there's nothing more technologically advanced than a horse-drawn carriage in this world.*

"Aether, do you know what it is to be human? As a god, you are levied with unreasonable responsibilities that a human can't even grasp. All us humans really have to do is just keep ourselves alive. We can take on more responsibility if we feel like it, but most of us just try to take care of ourselves and our family if we can. But it's not survival which inspires us to work."

I take to my feet and finally look Aether in the eyes. Her expression is clear and receptive, so I continue.

"It's our sense of purpose. The only thing which can make a human feel happy and like life is worth living is the pursuit of purpose. Survival can be a purpose, of course, and many of us value that enough to pursue it without question. But some of us aspire for more... we have to identify some kind of passion within ourselves and tirelessly toil away at pursuing it or else we don't feel like life is really worthwhile. But what happens if that passion dries up? If the thing you've been chasing all this time turns out to be just a mirage, and all this time you've just been wandering the desert with no water in sight?"

I don't expect an answer, but I take a beat to examine her expression. It has a tinge of sadness--an empathetic expression from someone who can't relate, but can at least understand, seeming to realize she's listening to someone describe their reason for killing themselves. I continue.

"Feeling like you have no choice--like you're locked into a singular destiny--that kind of feeling is exhausting. It's like, ‘ah, what a pain in the ass... can't I just do whatever I want?’ And yet, a life without purpose is stagnant. It gets old, and it withers your soul away. So in circumstances such as these, what is a man to do? Can he find the strength to just suck it up, put his feelings and thoughts away, and do what has to be done? Or can he find a way to make it interesting for himself? Recontextualize the journey--use it as a source of inspiration, or as a means to the ends of exploration--find interesting encounters, forge meaningful connections, and ultimately locate a renewed sense of purpose along the way?"

Aether's expression has become somewhat more hopeful, yet cautious, and perhaps a little annoyed. I decide it's best I get to the point.

"I don't know how well I can summon the optimism to embrace my destiny. I could wallow in anger and frustration and curse the gods and fight with a sense of vengeance at my back, but I don't exactly have that kind of energy either. At worst, I might groan and kick and scream at every difficult turn in the journey until a sense of purpose potentially emerges. But I think there's a way I can make it easier for myself. If I'm stuck in this situation anyways, then I might as well get on with it and find a reason to be here as fast as I can. So here's what I've come up with!"

With an exclamation, I thrust my finger out to point at Aether, whose expression at this point has risen into hopeful anticipation and jumped with surprise--perhaps even a touch of fear at being addressed so vigorously.

"Aether, it's not good enough for you to fuck me just because I'm a pathetic virgin! I'm going to make you fall in love with me!"

From toes to head, Aether's entire body goes beet red.

…
..."e..."
....
"Eh?!"
.....
"EEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHH!??!?!?"

Trapped In My Own Shitty Light Novel After Killing Myself, So I Might As Well Court the Hot Ass Goddess Who Summoned Me!

Chapter Four: Dreddigan's Pub

"God I can't fucking stand that foreign guy."

Cassius Coroder grumbled into the foam atop his beer stein, his flushed face fixed in a glare across the pub at the scrawny young man with messy black hair who always turned up alongside some heart-stoppingly beautiful woman.

Sometimes it was a barely-dressed busty blue-haired babe whose body could blind you with its brilliance. They'd be hunched over the table having some kind of serious discussion for a while, as the man downed drink after drink, seemingly with little effect, and the woman never so much as glanced around to meet the countless eyes which were always fixed on her.

More often, he'd turn up with a small-bodied vixen wearing her red hair woven tightly in two circular braids on the back of her head. She'd come dressed even lighter--just a black cloth tied around two handfuls of breast and the kind of slender back you get chills just looking at. the tightest little pair of micro shorts hugging a perfectly plump little round ass, and nearly knee-high light-brown boots which screamed "woodsman" just as loudly as the pair of daggers strapped to the thin brown suspenders which wrapped over her shoulders.

This girl wasn't so mysterious--they'd show up and she'd get shitfaced and rowdy--but if anyone tried to flirt with her she'd just keep forcing them to buy a round of drinks for them both until the poor bastard passed out. Somehow, that tiny body could filter through a whole drum of mead, getting ever drunker and more heinous, but never so much as slipping a nip to the crowd.

Her name was Exia Marauder, and while many of the regulars at the bar thought she looked too childlike to be lusted after, Cassius was not one of those people. He'd been drunken under the bar more than once by her, and he was going to have his revenge--no more nights masturbating to thoughts of forcing himself on her.

"What do ya wanna do about it, Cas? I don' never see that guy without a bitch on his arm, and you know we don't take too kindly to men who rough up our little eye candy 'round these parts." Darien Banesblood was an oaf of a drunk, rarely as intelligible as this--but the night was young. He and Cassius were dressed in light leather armor from the day's hunt and were strapped with short swords on their waists.

"Tch. Half this bar would like to stick that little runt full of cock just to shut her slut mouth. Neither one of them looks like they could lift a fist."

"Ah, c'mon brother." The third man at the table was just enough older than the other two that he could grow a full beard--a burly, red-faced powerlifter nicknamed Buck Pummel with a penchant for getting drunk and throwing people, who made no qualms about whatever company happened to join him at whichever table he'd sat to drink. He and Cassius had been hanging out for some time, as the smaller man tended to orbit anyone he thought might have his back in an altercation--which he was always raring to get into. "You know well as I that little red drunk's one of the most dangerous little pussycats in town. I've seen her land a dagger on a bullseye from twenty-five paces after just as many beers."

"Yeah?! And what've you seen me do then, Buck?! I damn decapitated a full-grown boar just today, you were there!"

"Only 'cause we cornered it..." Darien mumbled, taking a swig.

"What was that, fuckface?!" Cassius shot up to his feet, hand grasping for the handle of his blade and comically whiffing.

"Calm down Cas, jeez! The night is young, and I'm hardly drunk enough to deal with barfight bruises." Buck was jovial in the face of his friend's impotent outrage, completely sure in his ability to disarm and incapacitate the young man if his anger got out of hand.

"You think you're so great just 'cause you can lift a carriage, Buck? You're just a meathead, not even a warrior! It takes skill to be a warrior, skill! And knowledge! Not idiocy like what you've got in that thick skull of yours!"

"Hahahahaha!" Buck roared with laughter, his full, bass-heavy voice audible over the entire bar. "Why don't you show us those skills then, little man? If you hate that foreigner so much, challenge him to a proper duel. If he refuses you can tell everyone what a coward he is."

"I'll not listen to refusal! I want that bastard with a gash in his torso like the last foreigner who went and pissed me off!"

Cassius was referring to a man whom he'd killed in battle just three weeks prior. He, Buck, and Darien had become part of the small town's militia just a few months ago to defend it from the pirate bands who'd been sacking smaller nearby villages throughout the winter. In their first battle, the town had successfully staved off a well-planned attack thanks to the might of those local warriors trained under the tutelage of the powerful Magi-Knight Chrom, who'd been living there ever since leaving the country's head military branch. Cassius had drawn blood for the first time in that battle, and seemed eager to feel that sensation again.

With the conviction of a man with something to prove, Cassius stomped away from his friends and in the direction of the sources of his ire.

"Are you trying to get that guy killed?" Darien asked as his friend left across the bar.

Buck smiled big and jovial. "I don't think a weak guy gets to hang out with women like that. I wanna know what's really going on with him."

"Ah... so it's that damn curiosity of yours again." Darien and Buck both downed the rest of their beers and started gearing up to follow the action once it went outside.

Exia and Takuma were engaged in spirited debate as they waited for their third round of drinks to make it to the table. They had been at the bar for just half an hour, and gotten into an impassioned discussion about which of Magi-Knight Chrom's barely-legal twin daughters was more attractive.

"It's all about the tits! THE TITS!" Exia was exclaiming, while making a rubbing gesture in the air where her breasts would be if they were about six times their size. "Baika's tits are at least three centimeters bigger than Baila's and it's the most meaningful difference between them by far! How can you be such a faggot that you can't understand that??"

"How can the runtiest little broad in this whole town be prattling on about tits tits tits, tits this and tits that, when you have no tits?? It's the eye shape, the eyes! Baila's eyes are upturned slightly, and it gives her a more sultry expression! Any adult would be able to appreciate this! Only children fixate on the size of the tits!"

Cassius had already been standing at the side of their table yelling "hey! foreigner! Hey! pay attention, asshole!" for about ten seconds now, and was fuming with anger. Finally he lurched forward and slammed his fist on the table between them.

"THEY BOTH LOOK EXACTLY THE FUCKING SAME YOU MORONS!! NOW SHUT THE FUCK UP AND COME OUTSIDE SO I CAN CUT YOUR STUPID FACE IN HALF!!"

Cassius was beet red. In spite of his showboating, he'd actually never started a real duel with someone he didn't know personally, and so had built up his courage by guzzling three different unattended drinks on his way across the room. Now he was just barely holding onto lucidity, and starting to have to piss, so he was rushing through the steps of initiating this brawl as fast as he possibly could.

"Ahahahaha!!" Exia had immediately burst out laughing at Cassius' threat. "How do you cut someone's face in half?? You have to cut their whole head in half, r-tard!"

Cassius, enraged, drew his short sword and pointed it straight in Exia's face.

"HOW ABOUT I SHOW YOU RIGHT NOW, HUH??" He shouted, hardly even making sense.

"HEY!!"

This time a burly voice boomed with such thunder that the whole bar seemed to shake and fall silent. So threatening was the sound that Cassius felt a chill up his back and turned, sheepishly, along with everyone else in the room, to the source of the sound--a bald, muscular man washing out the inside of a mug with a rag behind the bar. It was Dreddigen MacLeoud--the roughest, toughest, and most respected business owner in town. He didn't take shit from anyone, and nobody had the balls to give it to him. With a stare so stern it could curdle milk, he glared at Cassius, and pointed directly at his sword.

"You take that horseshit outside!"

Moments later, about 40% of the bar had poured out into the clearing just between the establishment and the wall of tree trunks planted into the ground which formed the town's perimeter. In front of the crowd on one side stood Cassius, drunken, sword drawn, and desperate for a piss, with a smiling Buck and a woozily-drunk Darien at the front of the group behind him.

Facing off against them was a neutral-looking Takuma, dressed as always in his loose-fitting t-shirt with a picture of 70s Devilman on it and baggy black ninja pants which reached to midway down his shins, and a still hysterically-laughing Exia. Most of the men who'd chosen to stand behind them were just there to scope her ass.

"Mwahahahaha!! Just look at him!! I bet he's about to piss himself after all that beer he drank on the way to the table! Hahahahaha!! Let me fight him Taku, please!? I promise I won't even hurt the boy, I promise!" Exia was always incredibly perceptive--she logged everything she saw in her peripheral vision, constantly ready to spring into action.

"GRRR!!! Shut the stupid little bitch up and come fight me like a man!!" Cassius roared.

Takuma sighed and took a step forward. "Look dude, I don't know what your beef with me is, but can we chill with all the theatrics? I've seen you at the bar, but honestly, I don't even know your name. What did I do to offend you, anyways?"

The bored rationale behind Takuma's voice only irked Cassius even more.

"Oh, Takuma--oh boy, you should've never asked! That boy Cassius spends every night at that bar eyeing up every single girl that comes through the door, and he never *says a damn word* to any of them! He's the only one desperate enough to stare at *MY* tits; but he's afraid to confess because he knows I could kick his ass up and down the block!"

Hearing Exia's utter desecration of this poor man's pride and knowing he was about to make a huge mistake, Takuma tried as hard as he could not to but couldn't help himself--he cracked a smirk.

Cassius became so hot and red that he may have boiled the piss right out of his bladder, if not shot it down his leg without even feeling it. Rage overcame him to where he couldn't even formulate words, but simply shouted at the top of his lungs and charged forward, sword pointed straight ahead for Takuma's chest, with every intention of running him through.

Takuma sighed. "Sorry, buddy--" and with a snap of his fingers, Cassius was completely frozen in place, just a foot away from his would-be victim.

The crowd surrounding them was stunned silent, none having known that Takuma was a magic-user, nor ever having seen this particular, obviously-powerful spell in person before. Cassius wanted to shout, "WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?!" As his mind began to race, but found that his vocal chords refused to vibrate--in fact, his lungs refused to expand or retract--he couldn't breathe!

Takuma closed his eyes for just a second to think, and then began to talk and move at the same time, slowly heading in a circle around his frozen enemy.

"Now look; I don't like people like you. Prideful morons who refuse to think before they act are nothing but trouble for the people around them. It's because of people like *you* that society struggles to function--that the cycle of *war* perpetuates itself."

"Ah, Jeez, Taku, are you *really* doing this?" Exia asked; but she could tell that the blood pumping through Takuma's body from the excitement of having his life threatened had exacerbated his drunkenness. Despite his haughty attitude, his face was flush red.

"Ordinarily, I would just try to ignore people like you and move along. I don't have time to correct the attitude of every *ignorant shit* I run across in my path. But you see, right now, I'm in a pretty *unique* position. Let me tell you about something called *cosmic horror.*"

"Takuma, let the kid *breathe* for Chrissakes!" Exia exclaimed, getting worried as the speech began to drag on and Cassius' face was turning purple.

"Fine." Takuma shrugged, and Cassius began gasping for air as he regained use of his lungs and voice-- though the rest of his body remained frozen.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME, YOU MONSTER?! LET ME GO!!"

"That's right. I'm a monster." Takuma's face was suddenly directly in front of Cassius--his soft, pudding face with a gravely dark and serious expression. "I, like many things, am *powerful* beyond your puny comprehension. I could kill you *any goddamn second I felt like it*, because *I'm stronger than you*--just like your friends who like to humor you by letting you act like a piece of shit, and the enemies who will *inevitably* strike you down on a battlefield *any day now.*"

Amid the crowd, Buck's previously tipsy and entertained expression had soured into a frown as he watched his friend undergo what was clearly intended as psychological torment.

"That's *what happens* to *little morons* who like to *run their mouths* and *swing their swords around* all *willy-nilly*. If you wanna play *slapdick swordfights*, do it with your *little friends*, but don't try to *fuck around* with *shit you don't even understand*."

Takuma was about to continue, when he felt an enormous hand come to firmly rest upon his shoulder. He glanced back to meet Buck's understanding but unhappy expression.

"That's *enough,* man. He gets it. We won't fuck with you again, just let him go."

Takuma felt a little upset with himself for getting to the point where everyone was uncomfortable, so he let Cassius free of his spell in such a way that his body tumbled to the ground and immediately soiled itself.

"Sorry for harshing the buzz, everybody!" Takuma called out to the croud with the sort of flat energy of a police officer telling everyone to return to business as usual. "I'm not here to *start no shit* with anyone, I'm just in town for a couple more days to work with Magi-Knight Chrom."

"Taku, *come on,* let's get the hell out of here and finish our conversation." Exia was grabbing at Takuma's sleeve and dragging him in the direction of the road leading away from all the stunned onlookers who still weren't sure how to react.

"Right. Sorry again everyone!" And with that, Takuma let himself be led off into the streets of town, and down the subsequent alleyway leading towards the inn where he'd been rooming for the past month or so. Once they were securely out of sight, Exia gave him a shove, putting his back against the stone wall of one of the buildings.

"God damn Taku, what the *hell* was all that about?!"

"Sorry... oh *god,* that was so pretentious, I feel like such a fucking *dork."*

"Pretentious? That was downright *terrifying!* You scared the *shit* out of me, man, that was some *sadistic shit!"*

"Well you know, I was trying to do a... *thing.* Like a *scared straight* thing or whatever."

"Scared straight, well... you mighta scared me straight a little, 'cause I'm not gonna lie, it *was* pretty badass watching you just toy around with him like that… you didn't even flinch when he swung his sword at you."

"Haha... did it turn you on?"

"Maybe a *little bit..."* Exia blushed up at Takuma, and he smiled down at her. Both of them found themselves captivated by the vision of one-another's faces in the moonlight, pinkly flushed with traces of alcohol; and before they knew it, their lips were touching.

"You don't have that blue-haired girl in your room tonight, do you?" Exia asked.

"Not if you're coming by," Takuma teased. Exia ribbed him with a little jab, and then grabbed onto his arm and allowed him to escort her to his room.

Chapter Five: Waking On A Pretty Day

Ever since arriving at the sweet little lakeside town of Evermiir, I've been waking up in fits of laughter. Isekai stories are so incredibly stupid. All you have to do is show up and be the guy, and everything falls into your lap. Unimaginable power, popularity, and a hard-coded sense of purpose--plus it feels like there's a high-powered magnet in your dick that draws in all the most beautiful girls in the world. It's no wonder the heroes in these stories almost never get laid--if you threw that onto the pile of all the shit they've already got going for them, it becomes sickening to read. Even the most desperate escapist starts to feel pathetic for indulging in such base wish-fulfillment.

But actually living that life for yourself? Well... it goes without saying that it's pretty much unbeatable. Since arriving in this world a month ago, I've lost my virginity, and then some; I've met and been treated with respect by important and powerful people, been reassured that the purpose of my actions is as high as it could possibly be, and even introduced the world to spells that no one had thought yet to conjure. Next month I'm to introduce mechanical concepts to intelligent inventors at the capital, likely setting this world's culture on a course to make centuries of progress in the coming decade, and completely reinventing their conception of the usefulness of magic to go beyond combat abilities.

It's all so easy that it almost hurts.

And yet…

Here I sit on the side of the bed, looking back upon and studying the slender frame of a young red-headed woman in the soft morning light; her braids undone and hair falling to the middle of that beautiful back--her perfect little ass peaking from under the covers. If she would let me, I would make her my purpose--I would commit myself to this girl, even in spite of what I'd said to the goddess Aether when first we met, and save the entire universe in her name, just to see her bare my child and live out the rest of her days with me.

Alas, this is not her desire--she is committed to her life and ambitions here in Evermiir. As much as I've come to love her against my better judgment, I know that it has to end when the time comes for me to leave--and yet, I am only as haunted by this thought as I am excited at the prospect of what lies ahead--of what future passions and loves will storm into my heart, tear it to shreds, and head along their way. And maybe... maybe one of them…

This ambivalence--this tugging sensation in my chest is like nothing I've ever felt--more raw than anything I've ever made my own characters experience, and more envigorating than I knew my life could be at home. If only those stories could've actually captured this feeling--if they could've really shown me how much I was missing hunched over my computer pounding out novel after novel without rest for so long.

But then, I wonder, what could I have even done? How could I have ever gotten to know this without the luck of the draw, of being vindicated in my own suicide? To dwell on this discordance between the pathetic state of my natural existence and the sheer exaltation of what I can now regularly experience is to enter an existential death spiral.

I always try to wrap those feelings up once the girl begins to stir--her energy and company keep me away from my thoughts until I'm made to be alone again.

Chapter Six: The Town of Evermiir

"How many Barks for one of those fresh-steamed buns?" I ask.

The bakery in the heart of Evermiir, just north of the central bazaar, is overpoweringly pleasant to be inside. Something the isekai books never warn you about is the putrid smell of the unwashed masses in these medieval fantasy towns; a good woman will at least wipe herself down with a wet towel before she comes to bed with you--and I of course will reciprocate--but most of the time these people don't even consider their own odor; which is why the blast of fresh-baked fragrance that smashes across your face as soon as you open the bakery doors is such a literal breath of fresh air.

"Still haven't learned the numbers, foreigner? How long you been here?" the pleasant, rotund, middle-aged apron-wearing woman teases in her rough, backwater voice.

"Yeah, yeah--just tell me what I gotta give you to get that thing you've got in my mouth."

"That's six *Bark*--not *Barks*--and wait a minute 'fore you eat it or you'll *burn* that mouth." She wrapped the bun in a thin cloth and handed it over as I placed my rough-hewn chunks of metal on the counter. "Bring that cloth *back,* or you won't get another," she warned. Before I left the place I made sure to fill my lungs with as much of its air as I could.

Leaving the delightful bakery, I meandered South toward the bazaar as I waited for the bun to cool down--eventually taking an absentminded and impatient bite and scalding the roof of my mouth.

For being such a small town, the bazaar was lively at this time of day. Most of its stalls would only be open for a few hours in the late morning, and then the people running them would tend to other elements of life.

Living in a world of untold convenience, you never realize how much extra work is squeezed out of you just to keep the social machine running. These people wanted little, had little, and did little beyond keeping themselves alive. Anyone with more adventurous ambitions would likely sign up for the chance to die in battle, just to see some place they'd never known.

I'd come to appreciate the place--perhaps easily, since I didn't have to maintain myself here the way that they did. The day after I showed up in town, I'd begun solving a problem of ferocious boar overpopulation in the surrounding forests which had been terrorizing their trade route. For six days, I'd systematically hunted the largest, scariest boars I could find and sold them to the local butchers day after day, and then collected a hefty bounty for the whole ordeal once the guild officials could confirm that whatever boars remained had fled the area in fear.

So I had a lot of money, which meant I could spend a lot of time in the lively bars and got a lot of attention from the lively local women. Nevertheless, I was shy about the thought of losing my virginity to a prostitute--but the woman who actually took it convinced me that she liked me enough that all she wanted was a night of drinks. I think she mostly just liked the idea of taking a grown man's first time, and we didn't end up speaking again after that--partially because I met Exia two days later, and we had a much more sincere chemistry.

Evermiir, and the country which housed it called Balamor, were not as puritanical as the ancient societies of the world from which I'd come. Women held far more power in this world, and were trained to fight alongside the men provided they had the physical strength and

wherewithal to hold their own. Even a small woman like Exia had been practicing marksmanship from such a young age that most of the men in town didn't dare try to mess with her.

As it would happen, the genius mages of this world's history had invented cheap and readily-available contraceptives well over two hundred years ago. It was just as simple as inserting a tiny tablet into the vagina which targets and kills the egg... kind of grim to imagine, but completely painless and easy for the woman, and enough to spark a sexual awakening in the nation's history--although also giving rise to a surplus need of medical magicians to combat all the sexually transmitted diseases.

Virginal men or women were even rarer to find in this world than they'd been back home; but it wasn't exactly Sodom and Ghammora, either--if anything, I felt like the people here had much healthier relationships with sexuality than what I'd seen back home.

For a little while, I ‘d felt bad about sleeping with other women so soon after having told Aether of my desire to have her fall in love with me; but it had quickly become apparent that this goal was much easier said than done. After her initial reaction, Aether had tried to shrug the suggestion off, assuring me that I would have opportunities to make such attempts in the brief periods when we would meet over the course of my adventure; but if she didn't need to be there, she would be leaving me to my own devices, as she still had her own godly duties to attend to. So far, she had appeared in town a handful of times. and I'd taken her to the local bar, but our interactions had been strictly business.

...and it appears I've been lost in thought for so long that I've completely passed the town square and made it to the Gologoth Temple.

Though not chaste, the villagers are still religious; I haven't gleaned much yet about the history or nature of their worship, but it seems like people here are pretty non-judgemental about those who lack interest in the faith. For all that I know, the God worshiped here is literally real--after all, I was brought here by a self-described Goddess in the first place. From what I've gathered, though, the nation of Balamor is polytheistic, and Gologoth is more of a local patron-saint than Absolute God.

"Look at you, starin' off into space," a familiar voice coos from behind. I turn to face a smiling Exia. We'd gone our seperate ways that morning after some incredible sex, but it seems she's wrapped up her morning training.

She continues. "Chrom looks forward to meeting with you this evening--I think *Baika* does too," she giggles.

"Yeah, well, you know Baila's my favorite," I retort, peeling off a piece of my still-warm bread and offering it to her. She obliges.

"Oh, *please*. You're not gonna tell me you'd turn a girl like *that* down."

"I'm satisfied sticking with *you* for the time being."

"Psh." She blushes. "If you fuck that girl you *better* invite me in!"

"Most certainly."

The two of us meander back in the direction of the town square, unsure of one-another's next destination but enjoying the company.

"So Mr. Hero, how long are you gonna be sticking around? You better not be lingering here just so you can break my poor little heart."

"It doesn't have to break if you come with me."

"Hah. And leave a quaint little place like this to be defended by the like of *Cassius* and friends? *I think not.* They'll be done in by pirates in *days!"*

"And so long as *you're* here, they'll be perfectly safe, then?"

"Hey, for your information I've killed no less than *twenty men.* And how many *you*, brave warrior? *Hm?"*

This line of questioning makes me uncomfortable. Where I'm from, if you brag about killing twenty people in the city streets, you'll be avoided for the rest of your life. Of course I understand the violent culture of a place and time like this, and that she's only ever killed in self-defense--but the thought of all that blood on this small girl's hands is hard for me to stomach, no matter how proud she might be; and today, once again, I'll be meeting the man who trained this girl to kill--Magi-Knight Chrom.

Chrom is something like a different class of person from myself and the rest of the villagers. Despite being in his early fifties, his body seems unimaginably sturdy and powerful. Whether he's outright the strongest man in town doesn't matter--his presence is such that you feel small in front of him. His glowering, barely-visible eyes pierce directly through you, as if he can see into your past and everything which makes you who you are. When he speaks, it's with such curt clarity that you feel he's simultaneously paying the utmost respect to your intelligence, while also reminding you of your place.

I only know as much about his past as Exia has told me; he'd been second-in-command of one of Balamor's three royal armies, which had routed an invasion from the southern nation of Carcarel so thoroughly that their depleted population and resources had forced them to enter Balamor's debt. Carcarel was still granted independence only because Balamor didn't want them--and made them offer the heads of their entire royal family in penance.

"I suppose I should go to see him, then, huh?" I ask of Exia.

"Already? You've got a little time, right? I mean, *I've* got a little time if *you've* got a little time." She winks.

"Have you always been completely insatiable?" I ask.

"Only since *you* came into town."

Chapter Six: Chrom's Manor

Chrom's manor is nestled into a mountainside some quarter of a mile beyond the town both vertically and horizontally. It's a grueling trek up a whole lot of stairs every time, but not for no reason--when you reach the top, the manor itself is built to fit the mountain inlet within which it resides. There is no conceivable way to reach the place besides the stairs, and invading the place would be unimaginably foolish. Most of the town's militia needs to trek these stairs every other day to be trained all morning, and Chrom puts the young ones through the ringer. The result is a small town which can fend off the growing scourge of pirates which started turning to Balamor's coastal towns after looting the weakened Southern Carcarel's coast clean.

Panting and clutching my knees, I make it to the top of the stairs. The Gods may have granted me with unimaginable magical skills, but my physical endurance hasn't progressed much from having spent 99% of my time indoors a little more than a month ago.

It’s hardly an ornate building, but the interior is downright austere, and far more indicative of Chrom's personality. On my second visit, I'd realized that the building was just large enough that the entire town could flee here if its walls were breached by invaders.

Every time I crest the staircase, I make a point to turn around and take in the view of Evermiir. With the sun beginning to bleed across the sky as it's impaled upon the distant mountain peaks, the vista below is something straight out of an old-school RPG--but rendered here in stunning fidelity far beyond what even a 4k monitor can provide.

"Is it starting to feel like home?" Another familiar female voice calls to me from behind.

This time I turn to see Baika--a girl whom Exia is convinced has the hots for me (and I'm convinced as well).

To tell the truth, of course she is heart-stoppingly beautiful. Her short blonde hair, usually pushed behind the ears with a strand or two falling about her forehead, otherwise hangs just below her jaw in an even cut. I've never seen her wearing more than a loose green tunic fastened around her waist with a bright blue rope, and doing nothing to hide the fact of her massive breasts sagging braless and tightening the chest of her tunic around pointed nipples. I don't think anyone has the courage to call her outfit immodest, and I think she might be legitimately too innocent to realize it. Having turned eighteen a mere month ago, I wonder how recent a development that chest may have been.

"Best I don't get too attached," I respond, unromantically. "My journey will take me away before you know it."

Baika's expression tells me I've said something way too sad. I've hardly spent any time with this girl, yet it seems like she might be just as heartbroken as Exia to see me leave. Not wanting to get her hopes up by lightening the blow, I instead decide to change the subject.

"I hear your father looks forward to seeing me this evening."

"Right!" Baika snaps back into focus. Though innocently and blatantly emotional, she’s a very duty-driven and self-serious kind of girl who likes to feel useful. With sort of a marching gait and clutching tight to her ever-present spear, she guides me into the manor.

The building's interior consists mostly of enormous and largely empty east and west wings on either side of the entrance, with a spiral staircase directly in the center going up to the bedrooms of Chrom and his two daughters, as well as his private study and a massive library occupying the second story of the West wing. I haven't been up there personally.

Chrom's massive body is immediately apparent in the center of the Eastern hall, fully garbed in navy-blue cloak and with a huge, oaken staff like a traditional wizard. Knelt on the ground and comparably much smaller is Baika's twin sister, Baila, scrawling something on one of the many parchments strewn about the ground. It seems like Chrom is teaching her some kind of spell--never one to waste time when he can cram as many types of training with as many disciples into his schedule as possible.

"Takuma." He turns to me in acknowledgement and begins in my direction. "Let us go to my study."

Disappointingly, Baila doesn’t so much as look up from her work to see me. While mostly identical to her sister, Baila's breasts are just a bit smaller--more to my taste--and her eyes are slightly upturned at the edges, giving her this sassy, innately seductive look. She’s even more serious than her sister, however, and much more studious, having dedicated herself to mastering her father's wizardry more so than his combat abilities.

Allowing the towering mage to lead the way, I follow Chrom up the spiral staircase and into a room I've not yet seen before--a fairly conventional study perhaps, were the walls not entirely coated in small-font script. I have to assume it’s a code to some kind of extremely powerful magic barrier. Magic spells, in my experience, seem to be written in a language similar to computer code--and if this is only a single spell, then it must be following a pretty extensive rule sheet. Were the spell currently active, however, then the text would be glowing a soft color relative to its attribute.

"I will be honest with you, Takuma. I didn't want my daughters to suffer hearing of your coming departure. You'll be the very first to break my Baika's heart."

Well... I didn't see that coming. This tower of a man is opening up to me like I didn't even know he was capable of--and yet, immediately, I realize this is completely in line with who he is. Maybe he even wants me to feel guilty for making his daughter sad to the furthest extent he can allow himself. To be completely honest, I'll be much sadder to lose the potential tutelage of such a great and kind man.

"I wish I could stay myself. I've made stronger connections in the month I've stayed here than I can remember the last time I've had before. You've raised a crop of excellent people in this quaint little village."

"Not merely *I,* Takuma. It is a *good place.* Some of the greatest men and women who made it the way it is have long since passed; but I was lucky to know them. Should your journey take you where it needs to, I think I'll one day consider *you* among them; but you hardly need any *more* burden of expectation on your shoulders. Let us discuss the next step."

Chapter Seven: Lonely Baika

Baika sat atop the mountainous staircase on the perimeter of her father's homestead, kicking her feet and watching the sky go dark. Curling her legs in, propping her elbows on her knees and her chin in her hands, she sulked.

The young woman had never been sure exactly what enchanted her so much about the somewhat older man who'd shown up in town out of the blue just over a month ago. He was certainly different from any of the rough-and-tumble boys she'd grown up with. Even though she'd always teased those boys for failing to match her strength... maybe it was the fact that this man had such a confident heroism about him despite his physical weakness. He didn't seem insecure about his body the way the other boys did in the face of her father's overwhelming might. Or maybe it was the way her father seemed to respect and approve of him like he'd never done for the other boys, whom he looked at like his adoptive children even after some of them had grown well into adulthood.

For the past year, she'd been feeling left behind. It seemed like all of a sudden, all of her friends were telling stories about their boyfriends, their sexual encounters, or even the families

they were starting to grow in their wombs. Before Baika had even taken the time to think about things like sex or to realize she was supposed to start being attracted to boys, she was suddenly late to the party. Maybe it was just that desperation--the ticking sound from her biological clock--that was driving her feelings for Takuma.

She definitely didn't want to *believe* that. If her feelings for him were so shallow, then she thought she truly was a rotten woman for trying to suggest he find a home in this village. Moreover, she was at least mature enough to realize that he'd already slept with other girls in the village--she'd seen him walking around with one of her childhood friends so often that he must've known her better than she did at this point. And yet, if he didn't even love her enough to stay in the village…

Then maybe I still have a chance?

But of course, the more likely fact was that his mission was too important to stick around; so once again, she felt like a stupid burden for even daring to impede him with her selfish desires. Mulling over all these frustrations again and again, she buried her face in her arms.

What if...?

A question had unavoidably come up in the back of her mind over and over again every time these thoughts recurred.

What if I could just go with him?

Baika knew that Exia didn't plan to follow Takuma, no matter how attached she might've gotten. That girl was deeply embedded in her feelings of debt to the village, having been abandoned there on the streets as a baby and raised almost by coalition into one of the bravest fighters in town. Nothing could possibly stand between her and her duty to the people... but if the town already had her…

Do they need me too? When there are already so many amazing fighters here, and even my father to protect them?

But of course, it wasn't just a question of what was best for her or the town--she would probably just be a burden on Takuma. It seemed like he was on a quest whose importance went well beyond her depth; and moreover, he was a powerful enough magic user that her father hadn't even felt the need to teach him any of what he was teaching even his own daughter, whom he'd been training since childhood. Baika had never been particularly good at magic--and even though she'd caught Takuma glancing at her tits a few times, she could tell he was even more attracted to her sister.

Maybe he'd have me along as a consort... but I don't really want that, do I??

The poor girl's libido was twisting her mind into a pretzel. By now the sky was turning from red to purple, and the conversation in the manor had already dragged on longer than she'd expected it to. All she wanted was the chance to see him off at least…

As Baika stared into the distance, she witnessed a sudden tear across the sky.

Wh... what?!

There was no other way to describe it--the sky over Evermiir seemed to have been *slashed open,* like a sword wound across a chest. Instead of blood, inside the cut she could see a vivid, unbelievably starry night-sky full of dazzling colors beyond.

Only one explanation for what she was seeing sprang to mind--*a city-class magic spell*.

She'd never witnessed one in person, but heard tell of magic that could level a small town like hers in an instant; and so she, at the thought, sprang, fearful, into action, running toward the manor and hollering for her father.

She didn't have to holler for long--the central second-story window of the manor flung open, and her father appeared in it to witness the spell for himself, having sensed the incredible disturbance of elemental force in the atmosphere. At the sight of it, he didn't hesitate for a moment--he grabbed onto the back of Takuma's shirt, and then immediately leapt from the window, soaring so high into the air that he bounded clean over the entire stairway leading to the manor and went hurdling towards the village, with the sound of Takuma's surprised yelp trailing behind them.

Following her father's incredible leap with her eyes, never even having fully understood just how powerful he truly was, Baika made a dash for the village as well--with Baila following not too far behind.

Chapter Eight: Evil Descent

As Chrom and I fall into the airspace just over Evermiir, all hell is breaking loose. An endless wave of screeching purple bats and crows descends upon the town, flooding into the streets and going straight for the flesh of villagers with their fangs and beaks, bursting through windows and eliciting horrific screams all across town. Before we've even hit the ground, Chrom is chanting magic spells and producing scrolls from within his cloak, one by one dissolving into glowing particles before huge explosions rock the sky--disrupting and destroying swaths of the demonic outpouring as it floods from the tear in the sky.

Everything is happening faster than I can process; by the time we're nearly touching the ground, I can finally get a good look at what's happening, and the first thing I see is the kind old baker woman with three creatures latched onto her head and half her face chewed off--an eyeball freshly plucked and slurped down some demonic creatures gullet.

Rage overcomes shock. Having met ground, my bearings about me, I pull each of the creatures inside out with a thought. The woman immediately rushes indoors, and I know I don't have time to check up on her--these fucking things are everywhere!

"Heavy spells will destroy the village--I'll focus above, you below!" Chrom grits through seething anger like I can't even know; mine is too mixed with fear, and with the stirring in my guts that wants to vomit in the face of all this horror--yet when I see these people I know running and screaming, I am returned to focus. Group by group, I dismantle the creatures which surround each individual villager I come across and bolt through city streets, tirelessly returning to areas I've been, where more creatures have slipped past the constant sky-rending explosions that Chrom is pumping out from the center of town.

"EVERYONE RETREAT TO CHROM'S MANOR! DON'T LOCK YOURSELF INDOORS OR THEY'LL GET IN AND YOU'LL BE STUCK! JUST RUN FOR YOUR LIFE AND WE'LL DO ALL WE CAN TO PROTECT YOU!!" I shout again and again as I run all over town, desperately seeking the person I most need to see alive. Through crashed-in windows of certain houses, I see people completely swarmed with evil creatures--and once I've eviscerated the monsters, I'm

met with the pecked-clean corpse of some villager I recognize. My guts churn--I look away as fast as I can and keep moving.

"STICK TOGETHER!! STICK TOGETHER!! STICK TOGETHER!!" I and some of the soldiers attempting to herd masses through the streets towards the edge of town shout above the madness. Before long, a huddled crowd of thirty or so villagers with arms over their heads, screaming out in pain as they're pecked at by the errant birds which reach them faster than Chrom and I can eliminate them, is jogging out of the town center. Buck, Darien and some of the other militia members surround the group, swatting at birds with their swords while trying to pull them from the backs of their necks at the same time.

Once most of the apparent villagers still living have joined the flock, Chrom leaps through the air, lands before them, and erects a translucent blue barrier around the whole of the group.

"I CAN'T KEEP THIS BARRIER UP AND FIGHT AT THE SAME TIME, TAKUMA! FIND WHOEVER YOU CAN AND DO WHATEVER YOU MUST--THE PROPERTY BE DAMNED, JUST SAVE MY PEOPLE!!"

He doesn't have to ask. There's someone I still haven't seen among the group, and I'm not going to stop searching until I find them. With Chrom guiding the bulk of the townsfolk out of town under the cover of his barrier, the flood of birds and bats worsens considerably, revealing just how effective Chrom's explosive spells had truly been until now. Just in the effort of moving around town, I constantly have to blast the creatures away from myself. I find a surviving villager and create a path for him to madly dash to the group, but the next one I see is crying bloody death as beaks tear into his neck.

Unable to find any more survivors in the next minute of frantic running about and constantly blasting beasts off of my back, I finally snap--and with a scream, create a gravity pulse so intense it levels the entire block of town surrounding me. At this point, if anyone is left, they're sure to be trapped inside, and there's not gonna be a faster way to get them out than just bowling the whole fucking town over.

In a manic fit, I begin blasting wooden buildings into rubble, setting the sky on fire and scoring the town I'd come to love to rubble with tears streaming down my face.

WHERE THE FUCK IS SHE?!

Just as desperation comes to dominate my consciousness and I've damn near leveled every structure in Evermiir, the attack suddenly subsides. All of the birds and bats take to the sky and begin to encircle the village like a purple hurricane of demons. The creatures fall silent, and with the dust beginning to settle and the surviving villagers guided by Chrom nearly past the town limits, an eerie quiet lays upon the atmosphere.

And then… I hear a slow, steady, and chilling laughter.

"Ha!
Ha!
Ha ha ha!
Hahahahahaha!
What a fucking sight!"

A magically-magnified voice echoes from the sky at the epicenter of the tear in the fabric of reality--and from there, a human-sized figure descends.

"I can tell you really did love this place, Takuma--what with how *eagerly* you've *levelled it into the dirt!* Hahahahahaha!"

A rage more powerful than any feeling I've ever known pulses through my skin and stands all my hairs on end. I don't even ask questions--I focus all of my energy on the figure in the sky with only an inner scream demanding their body be torn apart; but it isn't.

Despite my efforts, the man descends from the sky all the way until his feet touch ground.

Even with a mind full of rage, I manage to be surprised realizing this man is clearly Japanese. He is my age, dressed in a business suit complete with tie, and sporting a newly-grown beard. As my constant psychic attacks prove fruitless to inflict injury, questions start to flood into my mind--but before I can start screaming, his glare shoots past me.

"Ah ah ah! Don't even *think* about letting up that barrier, my friend! You've played your part in this, and any further action will mean I *don't* spare *one* more of your villagers." With his voice still echoing through the air, I can tell he's speaking to Chro-- perhaps having seen him readying an attack--even though when I glance back, I can barely still see the pulsing blue barrier moving towards the mountains.

"Now then," the man's attention and heinous grin returns to me. "Is *this* the girl you're looking for?"

The ground beside the man's feet begins to displace itself as something rises from under the earth--a wooden stake to which Exia, unconscious and brown with dirt, has been tied.

"BASTARD!!!"

I try to run toward her, but I'm stuck in place--my body won't budge at all!

"Don't worry, don't worry! I'm not going to hurt this little girlie just yet. I mean. sure I could kill her, but I don't think that'll hurt *half* as much as how she'll look at you when she sees what you've done to her precious home town."

"YOU DID THIS!!!" I am locked in a feedback loop of impotent rage and frustration as my body lacks even enough give to struggle against the man's power. It's as if every part of me that isn't connected to my throat is fully numb.

"Yes, right, if you want to be *semantic* about it." The man approaches as he monologues. "But *how's* about a little bit of *exposition,* my friend?" He begins to encircle me slowly at a distance of five or so feet.

"My name is Akida Suzuki--age 27. Graduate of Meiji University with a six-year law degree, and by *all* accounts the portrait of a *successful* young prosecuting attorney. Recently *engaged* to an *absolutely gorgeous* twenty-two year-old undergrad with eyes on starting a family. *Everything* is looking great for me!" Akida stops in his tracks, having come full circle to stare me in the face, and begins pacing closer.

"At least--that *WAS* the case. Until *one day*, some *piece of shit hikkikomori* with a *pissant non-career* writing *pornography* threw his *naked body in front of a truck."*

With every new word that leaves Akida's mouth, my chest tightens--my eyes widen--the revelation barreling toward me faster and more fearsome than any truck ever had.

"That truck sent *his* puny body *careeeeeening* through the air into a *bloody puddle* on the pavement... and *then,* out of control, the truck *continued... veeeeering* into the intersection... where it made a *head-on collision* with a *brand spankin' new convertible...* driven by a *handsome young lawyer*, with his *pregnant fiance* in the passenger's seat!"

Vomit... I need to vomit!! I NEED TO VOMIT!!! I CAN'T CRY... OH GOD I CAN'T CRY!!!

My soul shrieks--with no sensation in my body, my mind twists in on itself, tumbling like shoes in the dryer, thump, thump, thumping and bumbling and refusing to stop.

"But, wouldn't you know it! It was only the *man* and the *unborn child* who were killed in the crash! The beautiful young woman was spared the burden of having to raise a *dead man's child* from birth all by herself. *And it gets even better*! Because when it came time for that man's soul to ascend to heaven... it was a *demon* that met him in the great beyond. It asked him just *one simple question."*

Akida presses his forehead against mine--his erupting, hate-filled eyes setting my soul ablaze and washing me of all hope.

"How would you like the power to take the life of the man who took yours?"

Akida shoots up, turning away, and booming. "And *I* said: *'take his life?!' You think I'll be satisfied just taking this man's life?! This man already took his own stupid fucking life! How could taking that shitty life away possibly equate to what he's taken from me?!"*

He spins to face me again, now grinning wildly. *"Before I can take this man's life away, I have to let him GET A LIFE in the first place! AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!"*

Akida continues to laugh uncontrollably as my mind remains paralyzed in realization. Just then, his hand suddenly whips through the air and catches a spear, hurdled from some indeterminate distance.

"Wo-ho-hoa, now! What is *this,* then?" Akida's eyes begin to glow as he turns toward the source of the spear, and my trance is finally broken for a moment.

"NO!! BAIKA, RUN AWAY, NOW!!!" I don't know which direction she's in as I can't move my head, but I'm sure she must've circumvented her father and come in from the side.

"Oh boy, is this another one of your girls? You sure do get around all of a sudden now that you're out in the daylight. *Hey, girlie! Didn't you hear? Your little boyfriend's the reason half your town is dead now!"*

In a flash, Baika appears in the air before Akida, arm lunging in a punch, and is subsequently frozen in midair just as I've been.

"YOU'RE THE MONSTER WHO KILLED MY FRIENDS!!" Baika roars.

"Well, if you want to be *pedantic--"*

"SHUT UP!!"

Akida's expression shifts to a frown, and with a gesture, he shuts the girl's windpipe.

"NO!!" I cry out, powerlessly.

"Oh *fucking hush!* I'm not going to kill *EITHER* of your little toys today, Takuma. Don't you see? You are *nothing* to me right now. How does your pitiful Pantheon even hope to stop Yog-Sothoth, if they can't even *comprehend* the power you would need to do so? What kind of *fucked up* story parameter is that, anyways? They seem to have thought that Yog just *wouldn't notice* they were up to something? *Hah!* His perception is *all-encompassing!* Were he not busy chewing through half the other side of the universe right now, he'd have smitten you with a

thought--but instead, he sent *me* to do it for him. And the power he's bestowed upon me *far* outstrips your puny mortal capabilities!"

"But not mine."

Another familiar woman's voice reaches my ears--but this time it's Aether appearing behind Akida. Neither of them moves--and yet I feel the constraint on my body loosen a bit--the feeling returns to my skin, as if Akida has lost some focus--like these two are already invisibly fighting right in front of my eyes.

"So the goddess *herself* decides to show up!"

"Enough nonsense. This plane is not enough for the scale of our battle."

In the blink of an eye, both of them disappear. Baika and I crumple to the ground--her choking for breath, and my steamrolled guts finally emptying onto the pavement. The circling bats and crows disperse, the sky closes, and a dismal dusk befalls the destroyed town.

Chapter Nine: Cosmic Horror

Baika didn't stay on the ground for long--once she'd fully caught her breath, she quickly brought herself to her feet, hobbling in the direction of the nearest half-erect building. From the rubble, she produced a blanket, shook it free of debris, and then returned to the road.

Dropping the blanket at the feet of the stake, she set about untying Exia and laying her unconscious body down on the blanket.

Next, she came to stand over the seemingly-conscious but completely despondent Takuma, who remained sprawled on the ground in stunned silence, mouth and eyes agape. Her tears fell upon his face for a moment, but she couldn't bear to see him in that state, and turned around, falling to her behind, clutching her knees to her chest, and sobbing uncontrollably, much as the rest of the surviving villagers were doing a few hundred yards away.

Having finally let his barrier down, Chrom left his daughter Baila--herself stunned silent and immobile--to stand watch over the villagers as he headed towards the center of town.

When he reached the small group of his daughter and her friends, he calmly bent over, grabbed a handful of Takuma's shirt, and lifted him clean up to his own eye level. Takuma's eyes failed to come into focus or even snap in acknowledgement--so Chrom pulled his bulging, muscular arm back all the way, and socked him in the face without letting go.

Takuma spat a glob of blood to the ground, but he didn't turn to look at Chrom. It was just as well--the man only needed him conscious.

"I know you will never return to this place. Spare yourself the torture of facing the girl and leave *immediately.* Continue with the plan we discussed at the manor--head to the Southern capital and seek the state grand wizard, just like I told you."

Chrom's voice was cold and hollow, clutching back his own unhelpful but overwhelming rage with every iota of his being. He softened his grip and allowed Takuma to slump to the ground once more. Hearing all of this, Baika didn't turn around.

Chrom stood for a minute, glowering and thinking as Takuma slowly pulled himself into a seated position, gaze still fixed to the dirt. With consideration for all that he could think of--his razor-sharp mind cutting through the whirlwind of emotional noise and newly-gleaned context of the situation at hand--Chrom produced a parting statement.

"I don't know the circumstances which drove you to where you were before... but you found the resolve to live again when you came here. *Find it again.* If your destiny is truly as grand as the Gods believe it to be... one day you will sleep again."

With that said, Chrom pivoted and began to walk away--

but was halted by his daughter's voice.

"I'm going with him," Baika spoke clearly through her tears.

"No."

"I understand that this man has committed great evil... but he is *not* an evil man. He must have been *desperate, hurt..."*

"ENOUGH! Have you not realized that *you aren't strong enough* to stand at his side??"

"Then I will *die* at it! For *alone* this man will *never* make it!"

"If he *can't* then he *deserves* to die!" Her father boomed, his emotions finally cracking through.

"And *then* what? *This* is what the Gods have chosen--what they've placed their *hope* in! What *I'm* willing to place my hope in...

"Father, I have just watched my village *burn to the ground!* Seen family in all but blood *eaten alive,* and I *know* I'm the only one in this moment with enough forgiveness to spare to *protect* this man! To protect our *only hope* for a future where *this doesn't happen again!"*

"And *who* will protect him when that monster *kills you* as well? When he makes *you* his plaything in this man's torture?!"

"If not me, then another... father, I *love* this man. You know it. Evermiir as I knew it is dead and gone. I care for you... for my sister, my friends, but there is *no protection* from this! All of us were here, and we could do *nothing!* If there's anything... *any* hope to be brought to this world... the *only* one I know is in this broken man's destiny. And *where* will I find it when I watch him saunter *alone,* dead within, through the *dangers* of this country to the capital a hundred miles away?"

"I've heard enough."

Chrom didn't bother to turn back around and face his daughter. He knew that if he did, there was no way he could allow her to make a decision for herself. If she truly had conviction, she would not seek a goodbye.

Before he stormed away, though, he stopped for one more word of advice to the despondent Takuma.

"On your way out of town to the South... gaze on the body of the boy to whom you did the very same thing which that monster did to you. Reflect on what you said to him, and consider what it means for you."

With that, Chrom finally headed back in the direction of his people.

Baika knelt in front of Takuma and, in a swift, strong motion, hoisted him onto her back. She glanced down at the still-unconscious Exia and whispered *"I'm sorry,"* then began her walk through the desolate streets, simultaneously desperate to survey the surroundings, yet terrified to let her gaze fall upon the corpses of her friends.

As she reached the edge of town, just about to pass through the gate, she was surprised to hear Takuma's voice.

"Wait." He said, and shifted his weight in such a way as to suggest he wanted to be let down. She set his feet to the ground, and though his legs wobbled as he tried to stand, he found his footing and stepped over in the direction of a mangled corpse on the ground.

Though it had practically been pecked clean, he could tell from the clothes and size of the man that it had once been Cassius--the young man he'd tried to scare away from danger by overwhelming him with power.

Takuma barely had the capacity yet to think--but an understanding crossed his mind; a reflection on a literary trope he'd long been a fan of incorporating into his writing, and had invoked a night before in his confrontation with this boy.

Cosmic horror isn't something you run into because you're stupid--it is horrifying because it is inevitable, unpredictable, and totalizing.

To struggle against a power beyond understanding is an unthinkable task--a constant, feeble grasping in the dark at a vague notion of hope. It is to combat, primarily, the constant onslaught of madness.

"Let's go," Takuma finally murmured; and with his own feet,f left with Baika down the road into the heart of the country of Balamor.